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INSIDE THE SENATE

A special report from
State Senator Pat Browne

June 2005 • 16th Senatorial District



Dear Friend,

I am pleased to send you this inaugural edition of "Inside the Senate." I plan to issue these reports periodically as a way to update you on noteworthy legislative and state government issues.

In this edition, we look at several bills that the Senate considered in May. Some of these issues, such as the proposed new guidelines for the EMS tax and a potential requirement that schools establish parental involvement programs, certainly would impact local residents and communities.

As always, if you have questions about any state issue, call my Allentown District Office at (610) 821-8468, my Northampton County Office at (610) 502-1567, or my Monroe County District Office at (570) 402-1499. Or, visit my website at www.senatorbrowne.com.

Regards,

Patrick M. Browne
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STATE SENATOR PAT BROWNE

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Measure Would Increase Parental Involvement

Conventional wisdom is that students and their schools are more likely to be successful when parents are involved and active in the educational process.

The Senate approved a bill on May 2 that would require school districts to establish parental involvement programs. Under Senate Bill 143, each school district would have to establish a parent involvement committee to provide recommendations to the board on the district's parent involvement policy and program.

The committee would be composed of parents with students in the school district. If a school district has already established a committee of parents to make recommendations on school policies, it could utilize that committee to meet this requirement.

The parent involvement program would have to identify existing school resources that parents could use to improve the academic achievement of the students and to establish means by which the school district and parents can communicate and share information. School boards would also be required to provide a copy of the parent involvement policy to the parents or guardians of each student enrolled in the district and make copies of the parent involvement program and policy available for inspection in the district administrative office.

UC Changes Would Benefit Employers, Workers

The Senate recently acted to update the state's Unemployment Compensation Act to make changes that would benefit employers and employees.

Senate Bill 464 was unanimously approved by the Senate on May 11. If approved by the House and signed by the Governor, this bill would make the following changes to the Unemployment Act:

- Provide that employers and claimants could be represented by an attorney or other duly authorized agent in any proceeding before the Department of Labor and Industry, a

referee or the Unemployment Compensation Board of Review. This change would reverse a recent Commonwealth Court ruling requiring corporations use attorneys to represent them in unemployment compensation proceedings.

- Establish a special fund to be known as the Job Training Fund. Monies deposited in the Fund would be used to provide competitive job training grants to entities providing workforce education programs and services in smaller counties. Preference would be given to counties with high unemployment rates.

Senate Approves EMS Tax Relief

Responding to concerns about how local governments were imposing and collecting the new Emergency and Municipal Services Tax, the Senate recently approved Senate Bill 157.

Currently, some municipalities are collecting the maximum \$52 levy as a single sum from all wage earners. This represents a heavy burden for some low-income workers.

SB 157, as approved by the Senate on May 11, would make the following changes:

- Provide an exemption from the tax for persons with total incomes less than \$12,000;
- Provide that no more than 25 percent of the tax (\$13) could be withheld from a taxpayer per quarter;
- Limit the maximum tax that a person is required to pay to \$52 regardless of the number of taxing jurisdictions in which the person is employed;
- Authorize school districts to levy an EMS tax of \$10 in locations where the municipality does not levy the tax; and,
- Expand the eligible uses for the tax revenue to permit tax relief through the implementation of a homestead and farmstead exclusion.

Flag Bill Passes Senate

On May 10, the Senate unanimously passed Senate Bill 82, a measure that would create the American, Commonwealth and Military Flag Act to permit the display of a flag by residents of a homeowners' association.

Under the provisions of SB 82, an association could not prohibit the outdoor display of one American, Commonwealth, and military flag by a unit owner on that unit owner's property. The flag could not be larger than five-feet by three-feet. The association could adopt rules and regulations regarding the location, size and use of a flagpole, but could not prohibit the use of wall brackets to display the flag.

Bill Would Open E-Bidding for Local Government

With e-commerce becoming increasingly more common in the business world, the Senate recently took a step toward providing that option to local governments. If approved, this option could speed up the process and save taxpayer money by making the process more competitive and cost effective.

On May 9, the Senate unanimously approved Senate Bill 62, the Local Government Unit Electronic Bidding Act, a measure that would permit local governments to contract for supplies and services by competitive electronic bidding.

The measure would require local government to state that bids would be received in an electronic auction manner. It also mandates that all bids received and the name of each bidder would be open to the public at the conclusion of the auction. A contract would have to be awarded to the lowest responsible bidder within 60 days of the auction or all bids would have to be rejected.

SB 62 bars the use of electronic bidding for construction contracts or for the acquisition of design professional services.